

When Twins Meet at Old Man Greenhut's

By DAVID A. CURTIS

Illustration by Will Crawford

THE river was up. The man who stood on the front steps of the building next door to Old Man Greenhut's saloon, looking over the watery waste that mercifully hid the most of Arkansas City from his hostile gaze, was unhappy. Moreover, he was indifferent as to whether his grief was known to the public. His utterance made that plain.

The train he had expected to take to Little Rock had just left. It would probably return on the morrow and, barring the unforeseen, start for Little Rock on the following day. In consequence he had to remain where he was for forty-eight hours, and he was doing his best to tell the world how he felt about it.

It was not to be expected that he would be successful. No one who has not been equally unfortunate could possibly appreciate his feelings. He was, however, making a noble effort, being fluent in speech and having a notable vocabulary. Beginning with a magnificent malediction on the entire Mississippi Valley under conditions caused by the flood, he concentrated his attention on his immediate surroundings and spoke in particular of Arkansas City.

He was no slouch as a speaker. It was not his fault that the language itself was inadequate. So far as it could be used, he used it skillfully without any restraint whatever. Leaping like a mountain goat from peak to peak of profane eloquence, he soared to such dizzy heights of comprehensive cursing that even he could go no higher, and he stumbled on a piffing anti-climax and closed his remarks by saying that Arkansas City was beyond question the gawd fo'sokenest spot in the universe and had been constructed out of the mud and refuse left over when the world was finished.

As he came up for air, emerging from the rhapsody of what he had considered a soliloquy, he looked around and perceived that Old Man Greenhut was standing at his door with a look on his rugged features that told plainly of the keen delight with which he had been listening.

A floating log had been so secured as to serve for a sidewalk connecting the two buildings, and stepping on it, he made his way somewhat unsteadily across.

Arriving at the saloon door he spoke angrily, as one who has not yet soothed himself.

"This here hellhole seems to be all choked up with water," he said. "Is there any place 'round where a man can get something fit to drink?"

"Sho' be, p'vidin' he's got the price," said the old man with a show of indifference.

Accordingly he led the way to the bar and put on it a bottle and glasses. For a time the silence was broken only by gurgling sounds, but afterward the stranger demanded a repetition of the ceremony.

After that a pleasant time was had by all. Owing to flood conditions, there was nothing to divert the attention of the company from the business in hand, and bottle after bottle of fiery fluid the old man kept in stock was placed on the bar and emptied.

The stranger was by no means the least enthusiastic of the company, but as evening approached it became evident that he had a single track throat, through which fire traveled upward more freely than downward, and seating himself by the stove he sank into a deep sleep.

Sam Pearsall snickered in contempt of this apparent evidence of weakness, but the old man rebuked him sternly.

"Mebbe the gent ain't so almighty thirsty as some," he said, "but he 'pears to be the most able-bodied man with his tongue what they is in the hull Mississippi Valley."

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Owen Pepper. "He sho' is one capable cusser, but he's got a twin brother what c'n give him cyards an' spades an' beat him hands down, on'y he's done got religion an' taken to preachin' 'steas o' blasphem'n like he useter."



"Leggo," shouted the first Mr. Entwistle, with expletives

"Does yo' all a'ays talk that a-way when yo' git drunk?" demanded the old man with vast scorn.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Pepper. "When I'm drunk I don't gen'ly know what's did. But these here Entwistle twins is"—

"Meanin' which?" interrupted the old man, with signs of bewilderment.

"Meanin' him an' his twin," said Mr. Pepper. "Name's Entwistle. The both on 'em is been famous in Tennessee fo' some years, 'long o' the vigorous words they talks with."

The old man stared at him admiringly for some moments before speaking. Then he said: "Does yo' c'nsid'able credit, Pepper, but they's weak spots into it. First off, Entwistle ain't nothin' but a funny noise. Stands to reason 'tain't nobody's name, let alone twins. An', second, they couldn't nobody cuss better'n this gent does, even if he was his own twin, to say nothin' o' bein' somebody else's."

"Oh, I don't know," began Mr. Pepper, but lapsed into silence as the old man reached for his bung starter.

Then the stranger woke up and called for another round. After that had been disposed of he said, thoughtfully: "As far as I can see, there's only two things can be done in Arkansas City. You can either get drowned or get drunk. Now, I never have been drowned and I never could get drunk. I get sleepy and stay sober, so I don't get any real satisfaction from that and I can't see any advantage in getting drowned, so what the hell?"

The old man did not always wait for an opening, but he never neglected one when it was offered. "The boys plays poker some times in the back room," he suggested with a winning smile, and the stranger brightened up.

"Show me the back room," he said eagerly. "I can make three meals a day on poker and keep on playing all night."

His words fell on the ears of his hearers like the glad music of a chime of bells, and without any delay whatever he was seated at a table with four of the best poker players in the State of Arkansas.

Jim Blaisdell was perhaps the most famous of the four, but Jake Winterbottom, Joe Bassett and Sam Pearsall were the other three. It was not long, however, before they learned that Mr. Entwistle himself was at least justified in his fondness for the game.

"What limit do you play?" he asked when they took their seats.

"What's a limit?" inquired Blaisdell. "A man don't have to bet no more'n he wants to, does he? Way I thought 'twas is how he bets 'cordin' to what he reckons his hand's worth. Can't make him put up no more, can yo'?"

Mr. Entwistle seemed to be about to explain, but Winterbottom spoke up as if bewildered. "That's the way I was learned to play on the boats, but nebber 'tain't right. I reckon I wouldn't keer about playin' if I was fo'ced to bet up to a limit ev'ry time."

"Well," said Mr. Entwistle carelessly, "it's nothing but a new rule they are trying to introduce. I don't like it myself. We'll play the old way. Bet what you like, when you like." And no more was said about a limit.

The struggle that ensued was notable not only for its duration, but for the fact that nobody won any very considerable amount as the hours went on. Whether it was luck or good judgment that saved Mr. Entwistle is perhaps not easily to be told, but he held his own in a way that seemed to perplex the others, while at the same time it plainly exasperated them. Here was no easy victim.

Moreover, he was absolutely tireless. All night and all next day till nearly evening he relaxed his attention only to call for refreshments frequently, thereby keeping Old Man Greenhut satisfied by reason of heavy receipts from his bar trade. Even he, however, was beginning to yearn for interruption when it came suddenly.

Just before dark a tall, powerfully built man arrived in Arkansas City from Little Rock. Going directly to the little hotel next door to the saloon, he asked of the landlord: "Is there a stranger in town that looks like me?"

"Sho' be," said the landlord. "I sh'd say what he looks a heap my like yo' all yo' do like yo' own self."

"Where is he?"

"Mor'n likely he's next do', into Old Man Greenhut's saloon. Th' ain't no other place to go."

Turning on his heel, the newcomer went next door. Paying no attention to the old man who sat by the window with his feet on the sill, he strode hastily into the back room.

Mr. Entwistle was just skinning down his hand, and was evidently finding something of interest in it, but looking up for a moment he said, "Howdy, Eben," recognizing his brother.

He had no time to say more, for he did never find out what his hand was, for the other reached his side with a cut-like lay, and, grabbing him by the collar, yanked him out of his seat so violently that his chair went spinning against the wall.

"Leggo!" shouted the first Mr. Entwistle, with expletives.

"Not likely," said the second Mr. Entwistle. "I got your fool letter saying you were coming to Little Rock to cuss me out of the pulpit and I couldn't wait. Instead of which I come here to lick the stuffing out of you and send you back to Memphis, and I find you losing your money, to say nothing of your immortal soul, in a poker game. Don't you know that I never could teach you how to play the game right? Now, I teach you not to go 'round the country in flood times trying to interfere with your brother bringing sinners to repentance. I'd baptize you in the river only I don't believe it would take."

"Leggo!" said the other, with more expletives, and the fight was on.

There had been fights in the place before, but none like this. The spectators looked on delightedly until it became evident that the entire establishment would soon be a wreck, when the old man called on his friends for help and pushed the furious twins outdoors.

No small damage was done to the levee within the next quarter of an hour as the ground was torn up by the two, but the steady flow of language that kept up, consisting of malediction from the one and prayer from the other, was even more interesting to the audience than the fight itself, magnificent as it was, even before the climax came.

That was when the Rev. Mr. Entwistle secured a back hold on his unregenerate kinsman and with a tremendous effort hurled him into the river, exclaiming, "I now baptize thee!"

When he saw his brother, however, exhausted as he was by his strenuous exertions, struggling feebly in the water for his life, the clerical gentleman raised his eyes and his hands toward heaven for a moment and plunged in after him, headlong.

What followed was, indeed, different from what had gone before, but it was not less exciting, and those who looked on watched almost breathlessly while the two struggled gallantly, and, after a time, successfully, to make their way to the shore. When they reached the margin they were dragged up and helped across to the saloon, well-nigh spent.

"Give this man a good stiff drink," said the Rev. Mr. Entwistle. "I do not use the accursed stuff myself, but I think he needs it." And he looked on anxiously as Mr. Ethan Entwistle drained the glass. Then placing his arm around him, he led him from the place, saying, "I'll have to put him to bed and look after him for a day or two."

After they had gone Old Man Greenhut said thoughtfully, "I never knowed afo' what a heap o' sense they is into what the Good Book says about how excellent 'tis fo' brethren to dwell together in unity. Them two sho' be two holy terrors."

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Owen Pepper. "Mebbe the preacher is some holy, but t'other one ain't overy much troubled that a-way."